

Name: _____ Date: _____ Section: _____

HOW TO GET AHEAD AT COURT

The Maxims of Ptah-hotep, 20th century BCE

*If you were an Egyptian leader someone working in the king's court, how should you behave? Someone, supposedly the highest-ranking **Vizier**¹ Ptah-hotep, wrote a book of etiquette giving detailed instructions, called maxims, on proper manners for members of the nobility and upper class. Ptah-hotep lived during the Old Kingdom period, from 2715 to 2170 BCE, which Egyptians saw as a golden age of their culture. But, because of the style of writing, most scholars believe that another person wrote the maxims down several centuries later.*

What kind of source are you about to read? _____

If you are among those who sit
at a place on your superior's table,
take what he gives, when it is placed under your nose.
You should look at what is in front of you –
do not pierce him with many looks!
Imposing on him is a horror to the spirit.
Do not speak to him until he calls!
One cannot know what seems evil to the heart.
You should speak only when he addresses you.
Then what you say will seem perfect to the heart.
A great man, when he is **at food**²,
behaves as his spirit commands.
He will give to the man he favors.

If you are an excellent man,
who sits in the **council**³ of his lord,

¹ high ranking official

² eating

³ a group of people who advise the leader

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concentrate on excellence!

You should be quiet! This is better than a **potent herb**⁴.

You should speak when you know that you understand:
only the skilled artist speaks in the council.

Speaking is harder than any craft:
only the man who understands it puts it to work for him.

If you are powerful, promote respect for yourself,
by wisdom, by calmness of speech!

Give no instructions except according to circumstances!

The **provoker**⁵ always begins to go wrong.

Do not be **haughty**⁶, lest your heart be humiliated!

Do not be silent – but beware lest you offend
when you answer a speech with **ardor**⁷!

Turn away your face! Govern yourself!...

Even the pleasant man, when he offends, has his way blocked.

ASSIGNMENT:

Write a paragraph comparing the rules for getting ahead at court to the rules at Washington Latin. What similarities do you see? Where are things different? Your response should be clear, well supported, and show your understanding of the reading.

⁴ powerful medicine

⁵ person who starts something

⁶ overly proud or boastful

⁷ passion